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TAGS: PGOV SCUL LH
SUBJECT: LITHUANIAN GOVERNMENT VOTES TO PROTECT HISTORIC JEWISH CEMETERY

REF: VILNIUS 258 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador John A. Cloud for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: The GOL on May 18 voted to approve boundaries of the historic Snipiskes cemetery in Vilnius, delineating areas that will be permanently protected from development and moving closer to ending a dispute that has dragged on for years and damaged Lithuania's international reputation. We are told the government action has the approval of the developer who owns most of the cemetery, but Jewish groups pushing for protection of the cemetery have yet to weigh in. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Cabinet of Ministers on May 18 accepted a map drafted by the Department of Cultural Heritage that covers most of the site of the former Snipiskes cemetery, which was the main Jewish burial area in Vilnius for centuries. No development will be allowed in that area. According to MFA Counselor Saulius Jaskelevicius, the plan also creates adjacent buffer zones in which development would be curtailed in the event that "bodies in anatomical positions" (i.e., graves) are found. Should bone fragments or similar remains be uncovered, digging would stop long enough for these remains to be removed respectfully and reburied elsewhere. Arrangements would be made for rabbinical supervision of digging in the buffer zones. The fully protected area does not include several buildings already built on land believed to be part of the cemetery, including a sports arena built by Soviet authorities in 1971 and two residential/commercial buildings erected in the last five years.

¶3. (C) UBIG, a company owned by one of Lithuania's wealthiest businessmen, owns much of the cemetery land and a larger plot adjacent to the cemetery, and has plans to redevelop and add to the sports arena to create a conference center. The businessman, Vladimir Romanov, said this month (reftel) that he was willing to give up part of his land to allow for preservation of the cemetery. Jaskelevicius told us on May 15 that Romanov had agreed to the plan that was then approved by the GOL on May 18.

¶4. (C) The other major player in the Snipiskes dispute is the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe. Representatives of the London-based group are to arrive in Vilnius May 20 for meetings with GOL officials and, possibly, UBIG representatives. Their approval of the plan is not certain; rabbis for the group have said repeatedly that compromise is not possible because all remains buried in the cemetery must be protected from desecration. But one of their team told us May 18 that there is "a lot of flexibility on the side of the Committee." However, he said, there also needs to be "some flexibility, still a bit, from the other side."

¶5. (U) The boundaries accepted by the GOL cover nearly all of the land shown on old maps as being part of the cemetery, except for the land now covered by buildings and a small strip that has long since been dug up for a road and sidewalk along one side of the site. The buffer zones do include the

land on which the buildings sit, and extend well to the north and east of the mapped cemetery borders. (Note: map e-mailed to EUR/NB and EUR/OHI.)

¶6. (C) Comment: Almost as soon as he took office in December 2008, Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius promised to resolve the Snipiskes cemetery issue. This step is a large one in the right direction.

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